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ABSTRACT

This report presents a national profile of black college freshmen in 1989-90 and shows how these students have changed based on the past 19 surveys (1971-1989), using data on 16,000-20,000 black freshmen from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. The study focuses on a wide variety of characteristics of black college freshmen: family background, financial aid and college choice, academic factors, behavioral patterns, aspirations and plans, expectations for college, self-concept, and values and attitudes. Although the report focuses on black-white differences, it is emphasized that the items where substantial differences were found were considerably outnumbered by items that yielded minor or no differences. Major findings include: (1) black students reported lower family incomes and education level than white students; (2) black college freshmen have experienced declining access to financial aid in the form of federal grants and have been forced to rely more on student loans; (3) low tuition was a major factor in black students' decision about which college to attend; (4) black freshmen continue to be less well-prepared for college compared to their white counterparts; (5) career choices of black students do not reflect preference for careers in the sciences or college teaching. (Nine references.) (JDD)

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The Black Undergraduate

Current Status and Trends in the Characteristics of Freshmen

Alexander W. Astin

Higher Education Research Institute • University of California, Los Angeles

The Black Undergraduate

Current Status and Trends in the Characteristics of Freshmen

by

Alexander W. Astin

Higher Education Research Institute
Graduate School of Education
University of California, Los Angeles

July, 1990

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The Black Undergraduate

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The Black Undergraduate

Current Status and Trends in the Characteristics of Freshmen

The Black Undergraduate*

While the black college student has been the subject of a number of studies during the past two decades, most of this research has concentrated on students at a particular institution rather than on the general population of black students attending American colleges and universities. As a result, little is actually known about the overall characteristics of black college students and how these students compare and contrast with other students attending higher education. This report presents a national profile of today's black college student and shows how these students have changed during the past two decades. The data presented here are taken from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), an ongoing national study of American higher education which annually surveys the entering freshmen classes at a national sample of some 500-600 higher education institutions of all types. The study focuses on a wide variety of characteristics of black college freshmen: family background, academic experience in high school, reasons for attending college, financial aid, choices of majors and careers, expectations for college, self-concept, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Sampling and Method

Each fall since 1966 the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has been surveying the entering freshmen classes at American colleges and universities. Each annual survey involves some 250,000-300,000 students, representing the entering freshmen classes at some 500-600 higher education institutions. Surveys are typically conducted during the fall orientation or registration period, although a few institutions administer the survey during summer orientation sessions or during the first week or two of classes (Astin, Korn, & Berz, 1990).

The survey instrument, which takes about forty minutes to complete, includes some two hundred items covering a wide range of student background and personal characteristics. Institutions administering the survey to their entering freshmen send the completed surveys to a processing center in Minneapolis where the students' answers are converted to magnetic tape for analysis by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

While the primary purpose of the CIRP is to conduct longitudinal studies of the effects of college environments on student development (see Astin, 1982, for a recent study of the development of black college students during the undergraduate years), the fact that CIRP has now conducted twenty-four consecutive freshman surveys presents a unique opportunity to examine

* This report was prepared under grant 895-3069 from the Ford Foundation to the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The author is indebted to Professor Sandra Graham for her many helpful suggestions, to William Korn, Eric Dey, and Yinte Wang for their help with the data analysis and preparation of figures, and to Robin Bailey for her assistance in manuscript preparation.

trends in the characteristics of black and other students entering American colleges and universities. Given the many political, economic, and social changes that have occurred in American society during the past two and a half decades, it is useful to know how black college students have been changing and how these changes compare to parallel changes in the majority white student population.

The data collected each fall are weighted according to a complex stratification scheme which is designed to simulate the results that would be obtained if it were possible to survey all of the 1.7 million new full-time freshmen who enter college each fall. For the purposes of this report, an important feature of the institutional stratification design is the use of separate stratification cells for public and private historically black colleges and universities (HBC's). This feature of the stratification design permits us to compensate for the fact that particular HBC's may drop in and out of the survey from year to year. For a full description of the stratification scheme and weighting procedure see Astin, Korn, and Berz (1990).

Although the actual number of black freshmen whose responses are used to compute the annual national norms varies somewhat from year to year, the typical freshman survey includes approximately 16,000-20,000 black freshmen. Following the sampling and stratification scheme, the responses of these students each fall are differentially weighted to estimate the results that would be obtained if all 150,000 black freshmen entering college each fall were to have completed the questionnaire. For comparison purposes, we will contrast the results for black students with those for white students entering college during the same year. The white norms for each fall survey are based on the responses of 160,000-180,000 white students.

Results

This particular report will present comparative results for black and white students based on the current (1989-90) class of entering freshmen as well as comparative trends based on the last nineteen surveys (1971-1989). Findings will be presented separately under eight different headings: family background, financial aid and college choice, academic factors, behavioral patterns, aspirations and plans, expectations for college, self-concept, and values and attitudes. Although the report will focus on black-white differences, it should be emphasized that the items where substantial differences were found are considerably outnumbered by items that yield minor or no differences. This is especially true for the trends during the past two decades. Where trends are not reported or discussed, the reader can assume that blacks and whites changed in pretty much the same fashion.

Family Background

Table 1 shows selected family and background characteristics of black and white freshmen in the fall of 1989. There are proportionately more black than white freshmen who are older than 19 (7.0 versus 4.0%), which reflects the fact that slightly more blacks delay enrolling as first time, full-time freshmen for a period of time after high school graduation. At the same time, there are slightly more black than white freshmen who are younger than 18 (4.1 versus 2.0%) when they enter college. While the reason for this latter finding is not clear, it appears that blacks are more *variable* with respect to age than whites at the time they first enter college.

As far as religious preference is concerned, Baptist is by far the most popular choice among blacks: better than four times as many blacks as whites identified themselves as Baptists (54.2 versus 12.1%). By contrast, Roman Catholic is the most popular choice among white students (35.0 % compared to only 9.2% for blacks). Whites are also substantially more likely than blacks are to pick Presbyterian or Lutheran, whereas blacks are more likely to pick Islamic and "other" religion. About the only denominations chosen by roughly equal proportions of blacks and whites are Methodist and Episcopal. The meaning of this, however, is not entirely clear, given that a substantial (but unknown) proportion of blacks are members of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, a choice not included in the list contained in the questionnaire. It is not clear whether black students who are members of this denomination checked Methodist, Episcopal, or "other." Given the large number of Baptists among the black freshmen, it is not surprising that substantially more blacks than whites identify themselves as "born again Christians."

As far as family background is concerned, the data in Table 1 show that the majority of black college freshmen come from families where the parents are either divorced or separated (44.3%) or deceased (10.1%). In other words, fewer than half of the black college freshmen (compared to 75.2% of the white freshmen) come from families where both parents are alive and living together. While the high frequency of single-parent families in the black community is a well-known and much-discussed phenomenon, it is somewhat surprising to find such a large proportion of black college freshmen coming from single-parent families.

Information on parental income shows some of the most dramatic differences between blacks and whites. Black freshmen are three times as likely to come from low income (below $20,000) families, whereas white students are more than twice as likely to come from high income ($60,000 or above) families. These findings on parental income are consistent with the information in Table 1 on parental education and occupation: Both the mothers and the fathers of black freshmen are better than twice as likely as parents of white freshmen not to be high school graduates, whereas the fathers and mothers of white freshmen are substantially more likely to be college graduates. While the parents of black freshmen are more likely than parents of white

freshmen to be laborers, semi-skilled workers, or unemployed, the fathers of white freshmen are much more likely to be businessmen and the mothers are more likely to be full time homemakers.

Table 1
Background Characteristics of Black and White Freshmen (Fall, 1989)

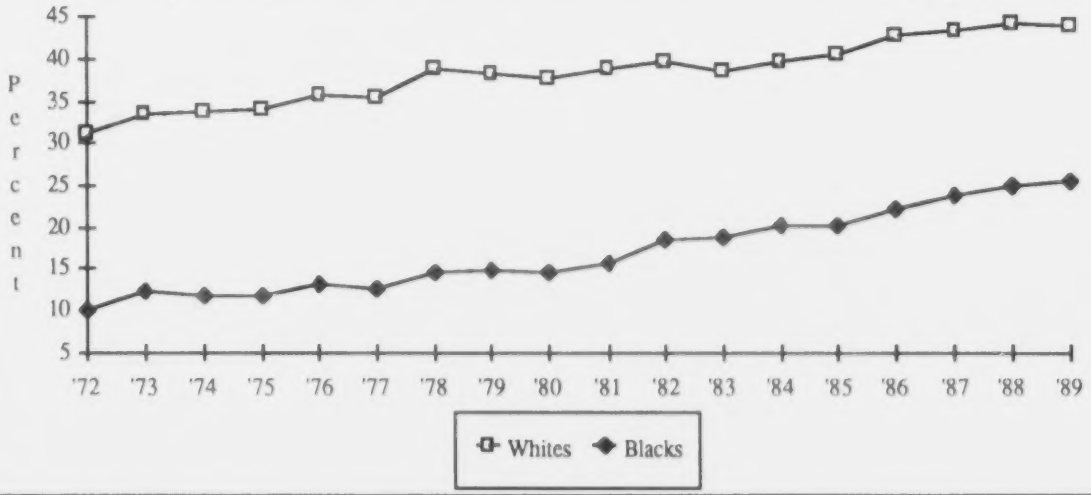
Background Characteristic	Percent Among Black Freshmen	Percent Among White Freshmen
Younger than 18	4.1	2.0
Older than 19	7.0	4.0
Religious preference:		
Baptist	54.2	12.1
Roman Catholic	9.2	35.0
Methodist	9.2	10.6
Episcopal	2.0	2.7
Presbyterian	1.4	5.4
Lutheran	1.1	7.4
Islamic	1.0	.1
Other	9.5	4.3
Born-again Christian	44.2	25.8
U.S. Citizen	95.5	99.0
Parental income below $20,000	37.6	12.4
Parental income $60,000 or above	19.0	41.9
Parents divorced or separated	44.3	20.4
One or both parents deceased	10.1	4.4
Parents alive and living together	45.6	75.2
Father is a college graduate	25.5	43.5
Father not a high school graduate	19.6	8.8
Mother is a college graduate	27.2	32.8
Mother not a high school graduate	14.7	6.1
Father a businessman	15.2	31.2
Father a laborer or semiskilled worker	12.4	7.3
Father unemployed	5.8	1.9
Mother a homemaker (full-time)	7.7	17.0
Mother a laborer or semiskilled worker	6.6	4.7
Mother unemployed	8.0	5.1

Table 1 reveals another interesting thing about the educational level of black students' parents. Whereas the white students' fathers are more likely to be college graduates than are their

mothers (43.5 versus 32.8%, respectively), the black students' mothers are slightly more likely than their fathers are (27.2 versus 25.5%) to be college graduates. Here is further evidence of the well-documented tendency for black women to attain higher educational levels than black men.

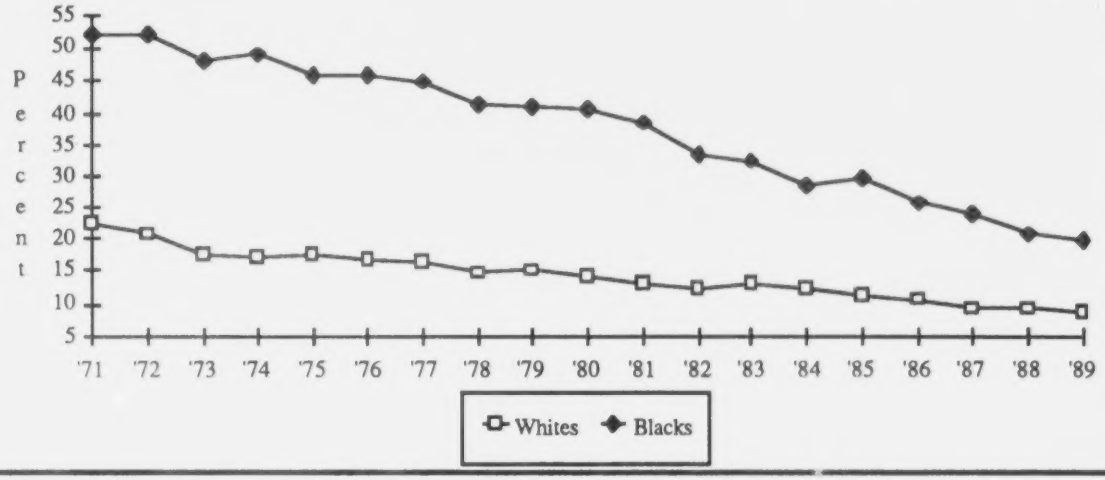
How have the family background characteristics of black and white freshmen been changing during the past two decades? Changes in most of the characteristics shown in Table 1 are similar for both groups, with the exception of parental education and income. Figure 1 shows the percentages of black and white students whose fathers are college graduates. During most of the 1970s the median educational level of the white students' fathers grew at a slightly faster rate than that of the black students' fathers, so that by 1978 there was nearly a 25 percent difference in the proportion of white and black students' fathers who were college graduates. Since that time, however, the differences have narrowed somewhat, no doubt reflecting the increasing rate of college attendance among blacks that occurred during the 1960s. By 1989 the difference has narrowed to less than 16 percent (see also Table 1).

Figure 1.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen whose fathers are college graduates.



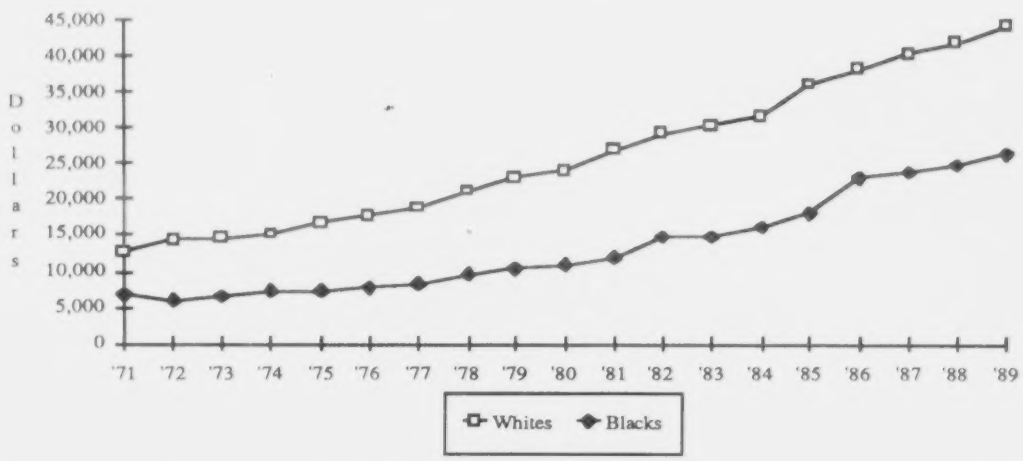
Differential changes in the educational level of black and white students' parents are shown more dramatically in Figure 2: Whereas the percentage of fathers who are not high school graduates has been declining for both whites and blacks, the rate of decline among blacks has been much more rapid, so that the 30 percent difference that existed in the early 1970s has been reduced to only about 11 percent by the end of the 1980s. These differential trends no doubt reflect the substantial decline in the high school dropout rate that occurred among black students during the late 1950s and 1960s (Astin, 1982).

Figure 2.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen whose fathers did not graduate from high school.



Do the trends for parental income follow the trends for education? Figure 3 shows the changes in the median parental income of the students during the past two decades. Rather than narrowing over time, the parental income gap between parents of black and white freshmen has actually *widened* somewhat since 1971. Whereas the parents of white freshmen earned approximately $6,000 more than the parents of black freshmen in 1971, by 1989 the gap had widened to more than $17,700. Of course, in constant dollars, the "widening" of the gap has been

Figure 3.
Trends in the median parental income of black and white freshmen.



much less. Indeed, if one were to measure the black-white income gap in terms of *percentage* difference, the gap has actually narrowed from about 100 percent in 1971 to about 68 percent percent in 1989. Still, by any measure the gap in parental income between black and white college freshmen remains very high.

To summarize: Even when we look at the most privileged group of young Americans -- those who enroll in college as full time freshmen directly out of high school -- the tremendous socioeconomic differences between blacks and whites are strikingly apparent. Not only do black freshmen come from much poorer and less-well-educated families, but typically these families have been broken by separation, divorce, or death of one or both parents. Among other things, this finding suggests that the typical black college student has far fewer home resources to fall back on than does the typical white college student.

Financial Aid and College Choice

Table 2 compares the financial aid received by black and white college freshmen in the fall of 1989. Here we find some of the largest differences in the entire survey. Blacks are substantially more likely than whites are to receive all forms of federal aid. Indeed, on a proportionate basis, more than twice as many blacks as whites are receiving Pell Grants, SEOGs, College Work Study support, and National Direct Student ("Perkins") Loans. Only one source -- Guaranteed Student ("Stafford") Loans -- favors blacks by less than a two-to-one ratio. White freshmen, on the other hand, are substantially more likely to be receiving support from their parents or their own savings.

When the data in Table 2 are recalculated to indicate "major" sources of support (in this instance, $1,500.00 or more per year), we find similar ratios. However, the black-white differences with respect to savings and support from parents become much greater when we consider only "major" support.

The findings in Table 2 have significant implications for future financial aid policy. More specifically, it would appear that blacks are especially dependent upon federal sources of financial aid and only moderately dependent on state aid. Under these circumstances, major cutbacks or other changes in federal financial aid programs are likely to have a *differential impact on black students*. With this in mind, it is interesting to look at recent trends in financial aid for black and white students. During the Reagan-Bush years, in particular, there has been a marked tendency to shift federal aid from grants to loans. Have these policy shifts affected blacks and whites differentially?

Table 2
Financial Aid of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

Source of Aid	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
Receiving any aid from:			
Pell Grant	41.1	19.7	+21.4
SEOG	13.2	5.1	+8.1
College Work Study	17.0	9.4	+7.6
Guaranteed("Stafford")Student Loan	27.7	23.2	+4.5
National Direct ("Perkins")Student Loan	4.7	2.2	+2.5
State Scholarship	17.3	15.1	+2.2
Savings (Other than summer work)	19.1	31.1	-12.0
Parents or Family	70.8	82.9	-12.1
Receiving $1500 or more from:			
Pell Grant	14.4	4.7	+9.7
Guaranteed ("Stafford") Student Loan	15.9	13.3	+2.6
College Grant	11.1	8.6	+2.5
SEOG	3.0	.8	+2.2
State Scholarship	4.7	3.2	+1.5
Savings (Other than summer work)	1.7	6.1	-4.4
Savings from summer work	1.3	7.8	-6.5
Parents or Family	32.7	57.6	-24.9

Figure 4 shows trends since 1978 in the percentages of black and white students receiving support from Pell Grants. The percentages for both groups declined during the early 1980s, although the decline was steeper for blacks than for whites. A major factor in these declines was the failure of the federal government to modify eligibility requirements to keep up with inflation. In effect, Figure 4 shows that fewer blacks today are eligible for Pell Grants than was the case ten years ago, and that the eligibility of blacks has been declining at a faster rate than that of whites.

Figure 5 shows the parallel trends for Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG). The pattern largely follows that shown for Pell Grants, except that the proportion of whites receiving SEOGs has remained fairly stable while the proportion of blacks has declined. A very different pattern of trends is observed with respect to Guaranteed (Stafford) Student Loans (Figure 6). Reliance on these loans increased sharply during the late 1970s, no doubt because of the "Middle Income Assistance Act" which, in effect, removed most barriers to eligibility. Elimination of this provision in 1981 caused a sharp drop in the percentage of whites who had such loans, but appeared to have little effect on the percentage of blacks who took out these loans. During the past four years, however, black freshmen have become substantially more dependent upon Stafford loans than have white students. In effect, then, the relative positions of blacks and whites with respect to Stafford loans have been reversed during the past decades: Whereas whites used to be more likely to rely on Stafford loans, today blacks are more likely to have such loans.

Figure 4.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen receiving Pell grants.

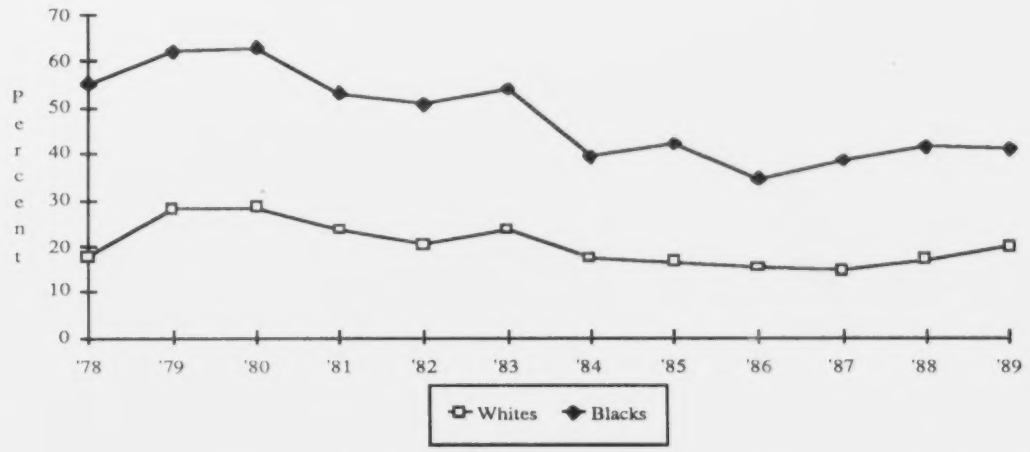
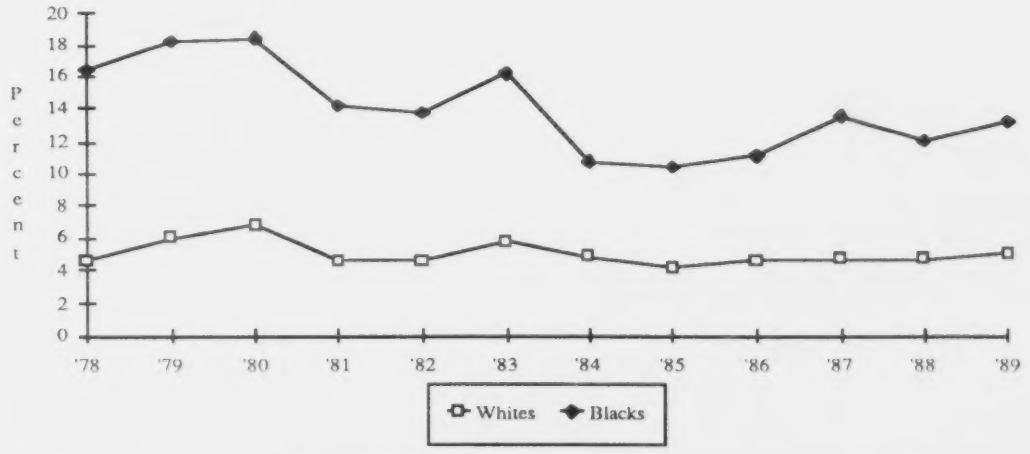
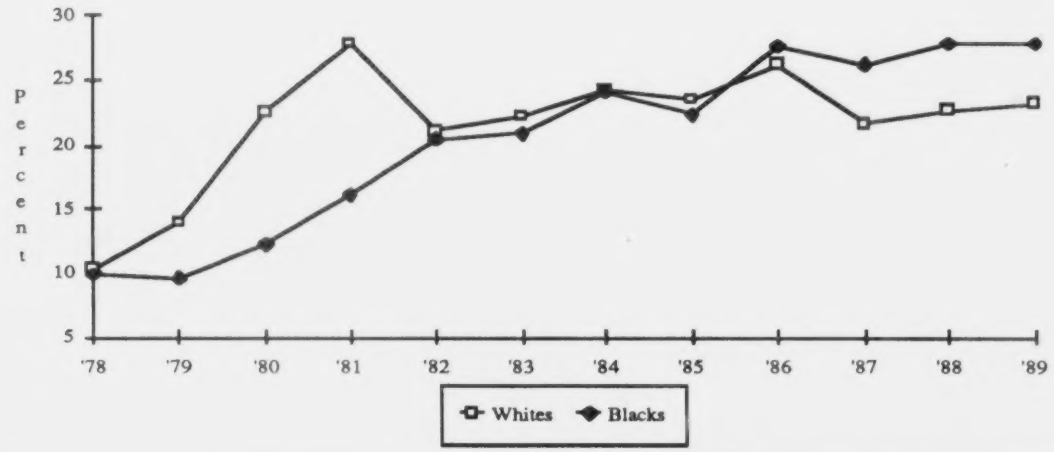


Figure 5.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen receiving SEOGs.



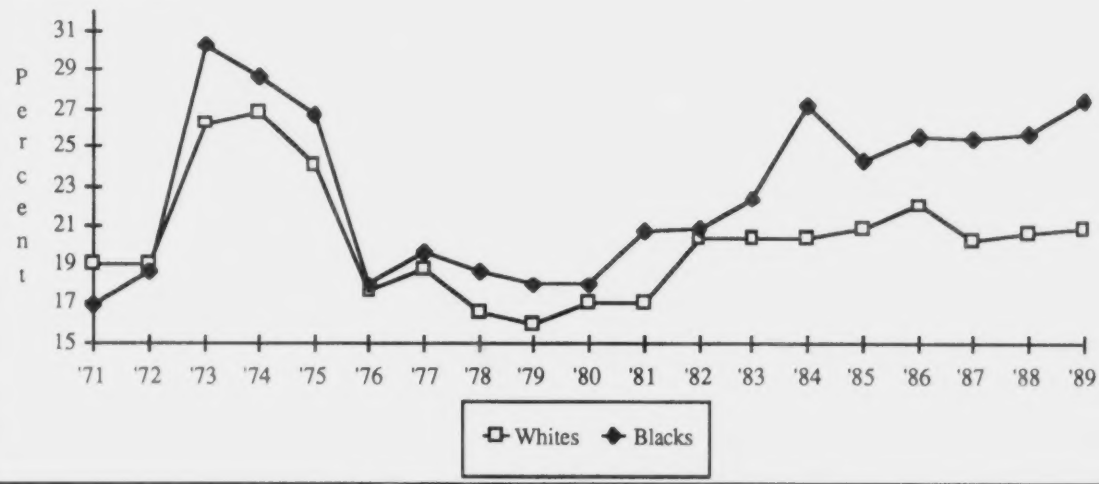
We see here a clear-cut pattern of changes in the composition of federal aid going to black students: decreasing availability of federal grants coupled with increasing dependence on federal loans. While the pattern is somewhat similar for whites, it is much more dramatic in the case of black freshmen. In short, it would appear that changes in federal financial aid policies during the past decade have had a substantial impact on the black freshman's financial aid package: Fewer black freshmen have access to federal grants and more must now rely on federal loans.

Figure 6.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen receiving Stafford loans.



Have these changes in the availability of federal financial aid affected the college choice patterns of black and white students differentially? Figure 7 suggests that they have. Whereas the percentages of black and white students who said that they picked their college because of "low tuition" remained very close during the 1970s and early 1980s, since that time the two groups have diverged so that now black students are significantly more likely than white students to say that they picked their college because of low tuition.

Figure 7.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen choosing their college because of low tuition.



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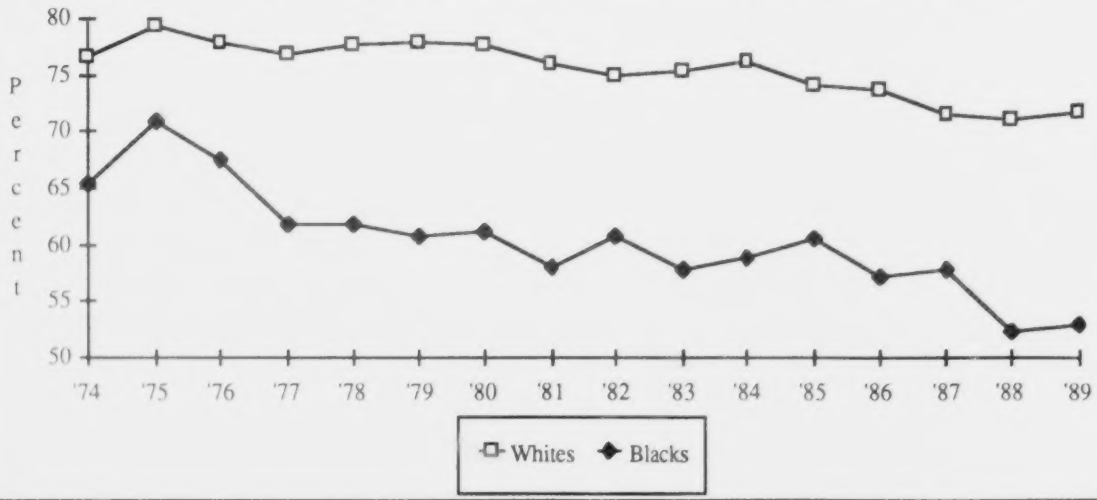
Further insight about these changes is provided in Figure 8, which shows changes in the percentages of freshmen indicating that they are attending their "first choice" college. Note that the curves have been declining gradually during the 1980s, so that both whites and blacks are less likely today to say that they are attending their first choice college than they were ten years ago. During recent years, however, the decline for blacks has been somewhat sharper, so that the black-white difference has increased somewhat.

In summary, the results concerning trends in financial aid and college choice show a highly consistent pattern: Blacks must now rely more on loans because of the declining availability of federal grants. At the same time, blacks are increasingly likely to say that they picked their college because of low tuition and that they are not attending their first choice college. If we are correct in assuming that these changes in college choice patterns are attributable in part to declining availability of federal grants, then it may also be reasonable to conclude that the declining college attendance rates for blacks and the declining proportion of blacks among new college graduates that have been observed during recent years (Educational Record, 1990) may also be attributable in part to changes in federal financial aid policy.

Figure 8.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen attending their first-choice college.



Academic Factors

Academic characteristics of black and white freshmen entering college in the fall of 1989 are shown in Table 3. White freshmen earned substantially better grades in high school than black freshmen did. On a proportionate basis, more than twice as many whites as blacks received "A" grades in high school (24.7 versus 10.5%, respectively), whereas more than twice as many blacks as whites received average grades of "C+" or lower (32.0 versus 15.8%, respectively). These

differences are further reflected in the larger percentages of blacks who had remedial work in high school and in the lower percentage of blacks who rate themselves above average in academic ability. Interestingly enough, blacks appear to spend about the same amount of time studying as whites do, but they are much more likely than whites to study in the school library. This difference, together with the much lower socioeconomic status of blacks (Table 1), raises the possibility that the home conditions for studying may not be as favorable among black students as among white students. This possibility appears to be a potentially important topic for future research.

Table 3
Academic Characteristics of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

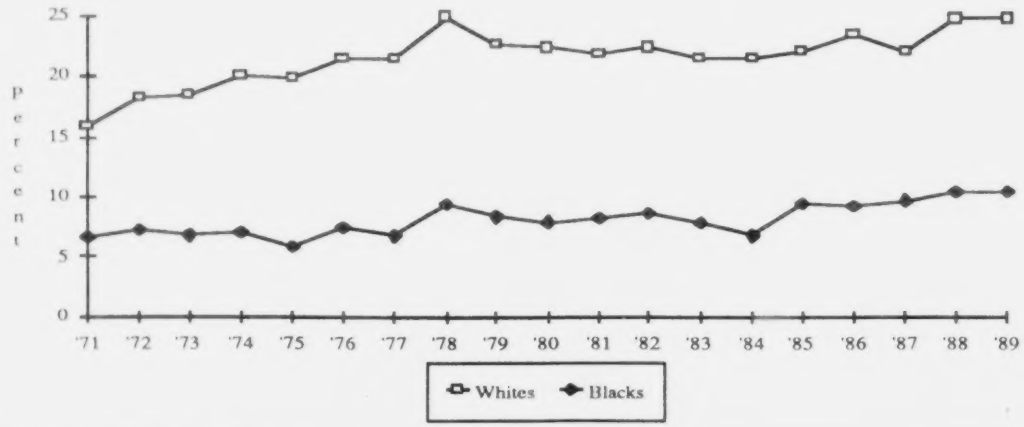
	Percent Among	
Characteristics	Blacks	Whites
A or A- grades in high school	10.5	24.7
C+ or lower grades in high school	32.0	15.8
Rates self above average in academic ability	43.5	57.4
Averages 6 or more hours studying per week	41.8	41.8
Frequently did extra reading for class	14.5	9.4
Argued with a teacher in class	31.9	43.5
Frequently studied in the library	21.0	12.1
Have had remedial work in:		
reading	11.1	4.5
English	11.0	4.7
math	13.3	10.0
Will need remedial work in:		
reading	8.9	3.7
English	19.6	9.2
math	45.3	23.7
foreign languages	21.8	8.5
"Very good" chance of		
getting tutoring help in some courses	26.9	10.7
failing a course	1.9	1.2
making at least a "B" average	40.3	41.1
needing extra time to get a degree	10.3	7.0
being elected to honor society	12.6	6.9

Even though blacks get substantially poorer grades in high school and rate themselves lower on academic ability than whites do, their academic expectations for college are comparable to those of whites. Roughly equal percentages of both groups (40%) expect to make at least a "B" average in college and equally small percentages (less than 2%) expect to fail a course in college. Remarkably, a significantly higher percentage of blacks than whites (12.6 versus 6.9%) expect to be elected to an academic honor society. Given the substantial relationship between academic performance in high school and in college, these results suggest that many black students may have unrealistically high expectations about their likely academic performance in college. On the other hand, high expectations may be an adaptive method of coping with the potential stress and uncertainty of one's first year in college. The real significance of this finding can be determined by follow up research: Do high aspirations compensate for inadequate preparation, or do they lead to greater disappointments?

This conclusion is supported by the findings with respect to remedial work (Table 3). Consistent with their lower high school grades, blacks are twice as likely as whites are to say that they will need remedial work in each of four areas: Reading, English, math, and foreign languages. These results are consistent with the fact that blacks have also had more remedial work in these same subjects at the high school level.

How has the academic preparation of black students been changing over the past two decades? Figure 9 shows the percentages of black and white freshmen who obtained "A-" or higher averages during high school. While the trends document the well-known "grade inflation"

Figure 9.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen with average high school grades of A- or higher.



that has been occurring in high schools during recent years, inflation seems to have affected the white students' grades more than the grades of blacks. Consequently, the gap between blacks and whites in the percentage receiving "A-" or better averages has been increasing: Thus, the difference between blacks and whites in the percentage of "A" averages doubled (from 7 to 14%) between 1971 and 1989.

Similar findings can be observed with respect to students with low grades (C+ or less) from high school (Figure 10). Whereas the percentages for both blacks and whites have been declining since 1971, the decline has been somewhat steeper among whites, slightly widening the gap between blacks and whites.

Figure 10.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen with average high school grades of C+ or lower.

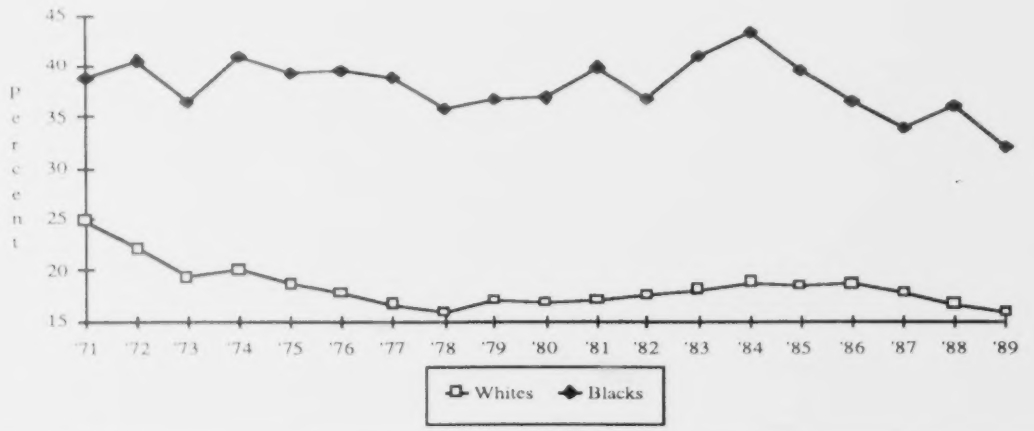


Figure 11 shows trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen who rate themselves above average in academic ability. The fact that both curves show a slight upward trend might be explained in terms of the grade inflation noted in the previous figure. However, unlike trends in high school grades, the gap between blacks and whites in academic self-concept has actually been narrowing. Black freshmen of today, in other words, are more like the white freshmen in their academic self-concept than was the case two decades ago.

Similar results are shown in Figure 12, which portrays trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen who expect to be elected to an academic honor society in college. The upward trend of both curves may reflect grade inflation in the secondary schools. However, the curve for blacks is steeper than the one for whites, in spite of the increasing discrepancy in high school grades (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 11.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen rating themselves "above average" in academic ability.

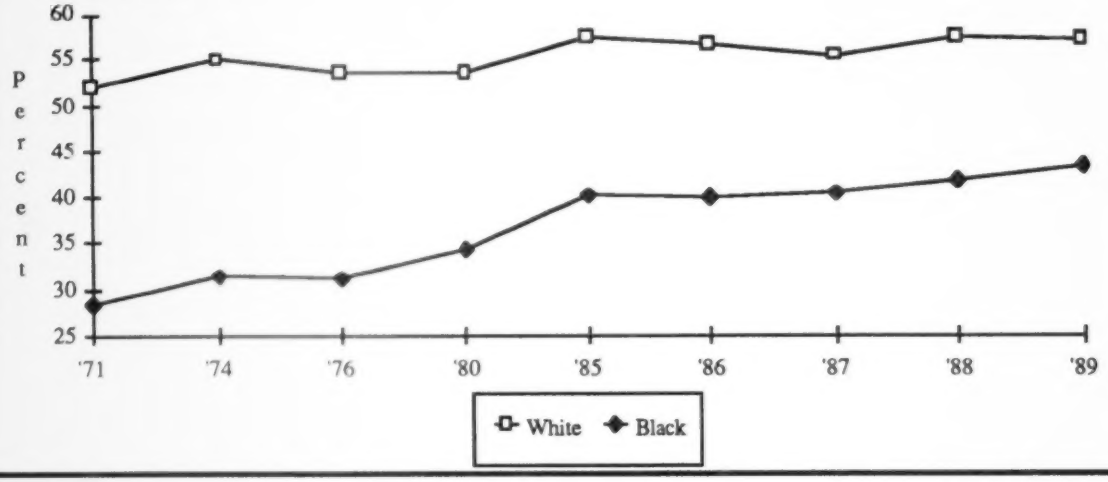
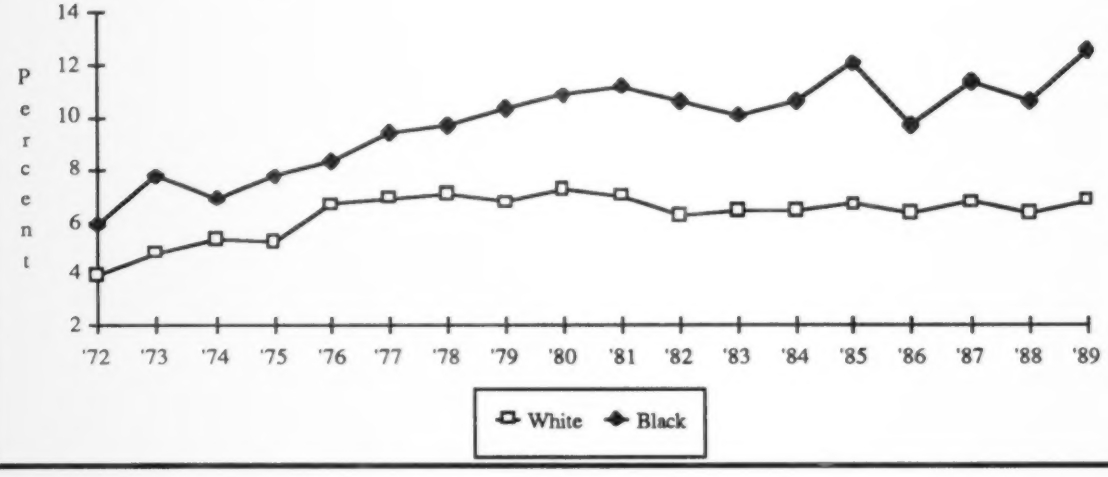


Figure 12.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen who expect to be elected to an academic honor society.



These differential trends for blacks and whites are puzzling. One would normally expect black-white differences in high school grades, academic self-concept, and academic expectations for college to follow similar trends. But instead we find blacks' academic self-concept and academic expectations to be accelerating at a greater rate than that of whites, in spite of the fact that the gap in high school grades favoring whites has actually widened during the same period of time.

One possible explanation for the increasing academic self concept and expectations is the upward trend in black students' scores on college admissions tests: Between 1976 and 1988, black students' scores on the SAT increased by 50 points; by contrast, white students' scores remained virtually unchanged during the same period (UNCF Research Trends, 1990).

Behavioral Patterns

The freshman survey contains two groups of questions having to do with the behavioral tendencies of freshmen. One of these lists asks students to indicate whether they engaged in certain activities frequently, occasionally, or not at all. The other list asks students to indicate how many hours per week they spent in various activities. Items from these two lists that showed significant differences between black and white freshmen are shown in Table 4. Perhaps the most interesting pattern to been seen in Table 4 is the substantially greater tendency for whites to smoke cigarettes, consume alcohol, "party," and socialize. Whites are twice as likely as blacks to consume wine, beer, or hard liquor and more than *four times* as likely to be frequent cigarette smokers. This less frequent use of tobacco and alcohol by black freshmen was also noted nearly twenty-five years ago in a similar analysis of CIRP data (Bayer & Boruch, 1969).

Blacks are, not surprisingly, more likely than whites are to have participated in demonstrations during high school. Consistent with their less frequent use of tobacco and alcohol, they are also slightly more likely to have attended religious services. Blacks are also slightly more likely than whites are to report that they frequently felt depressed during the past year. What is perhaps most troubling, however, is the substantially greater percentage of blacks than whites (43 versus 31%) who report spending six or more hours per week watching television. Whites, on the other hand, are more likely to report working six or more hours per week for pay or spending six or more hours per week in sports or exercise activities.

Many of these findings would seem to contradict popular stereotypes about black students. Despite daily media reports about drug abuse in our inner cities, black college students, compared to their white counterparts, turn out to be infrequent consumers of alcohol and tobacco. And despite the stereotype of the black student attending college to participate in athletics, it is the white students who turn out to be the much more frequent participants (given the overrepresentation of blacks on most college athletic teams, this finding would suggest that black-white differences in athletic participation and physical exercise are even greater among students who are not members of college teams). Finally, despite the large differences in financial resources of black and white students (Table 1), white students are more likely than black students are to have had paying jobs in high school. Why black students, whose financial need is greater than that of whites, should be less likely to hold part-time and summer jobs is an important topic for future research.

Table 4
Contrasting Behavioral Patterns of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

Behavior	Percent Reporting Among Blacks	Whites	Black-White Difference
Participated in demonstrations	44.2	35.9	+8.3
Attended religious service	88.0	82.5	+5.5
Frequently felt depressed	12.0	8.5	+3.5
Worried about choosing a career	69.2	75.7	-6.5
Frequently smoked cigarettes	2.6	11.2	-8.6
Drank wine or hard liquor	33.7	64.7	-31.0
Drank beer	28.3	65.1	-37.2
Spent six or more hours per week:			
Watching TV	43.0	30.7	+12.3
Partying	25.4	33.8	-8.4
Working for pay	56.7	65.6	-8.9
Exercising or sports	36.6	50.0	-13.4
Socializing with friends	60.9	79.5	-18.6

Aspirations and Plans

What are the educational and vocational plans and aspirations of black freshmen? Table 5 shows the highest degree planned by black and white freshmen. Blacks are more likely than whites to aspire to *all* postgraduate degrees, but especially the doctorate and advanced professional (M.D., J.D.) degrees. White freshmen, by contrast, are more likely to aspire to only a Bachelor's degree or to less than a Bachelor's. These findings once again document the well-researched fact that black students have very high educational aspirations.

How consistent are these aspirations with the black students' career choices? Table 6 compares the freshmen career choices of black and white freshmen. The fact that blacks are substantially more likely than whites are to aspire to careers as lawyers or physicians is consistent with their high aspirations for advanced professional degrees. However, the largest career choice differences favoring blacks are in business, computer programming, and nursing, none of which necessarily requires graduate training. Indeed, black students are *less* likely than whites are to aspire to careers in science or college teaching, the very fields where one would be most likely to need the Ph.D. degree. Here we have another puzzling result: Even though blacks are 50 percent more likely than whites to aspire to doctorate degrees (Table 5), they are *less* likely than whites to

aspire to careers that normally require the doctorate. Clearly, black students' high aspirations for doctoral degrees are inconsistent with their patterns of career choices.

Table 5
Highest Degree Planned by Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

Highest Degree Planned	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites
Doctorate (Ph.D or Ed.D)	15.7	11.0
Advanced professional (M.D., J.D., B.D., etc.)	14.3	10.1
Master's	37.7	36.9
Bachelor's	25.7	33.9
Less than bachelor's	4.7	6.5

Table 6
Career Choices of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

Probable Career Choice	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
Businessperson	27.5	21.2	+6.3
Computer programmer or analyst	6.7	2.1	+4.6
Nurse	5.4	2.4	+3.0
Lawyer	7.5	5.1	+2.4
Physician	5.4	3.2	+2.2
College Teacher	0.2	0.4	-0.2
Writer or journalist	2.2	2.4	-0.2
Engineer	8.3	8.9	-0.6
Scientific Researcher	.8	1.7	-0.9
Skilled trades	.4	1.4	-1.0
Therapist (physical, speech, occupational)	1.3	2.8	-1.5
School Teacher	5.1	8.9	-3.8
Undecided	6.8	12.1	-5.3

Table 7 shows the major field choices of black and white freshmen. Generally speaking these choices are consistent with the career choice patterns shown in the previous table. Black students, compared to whites, tend to be more attracted to majors in business, nursing, computer

science, data processing, and premedicine, and less attracted to majors in the biological sciences, physical sciences, engineering, and education. Given the declining representation of blacks in almost all fields of science and the rapidly decreasing representation of blacks -- especially black males -- among Ph. D. recipients (Minority Success, 1990), these figures are troubling. Indeed, if we were to exclude from biological science majors those students aspiring to medical careers, the small discrepancy shown in Table 7 would be substantially larger. Given the fact that the underrepresentation of blacks at the undergraduate level becomes even more severe at the graduate level (Astin, 1982), the dearth of black students pursuing careers in science is bound to become worse unless major changes in the incentives associated with science careers are made.

Table 7
Major Field Choices of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

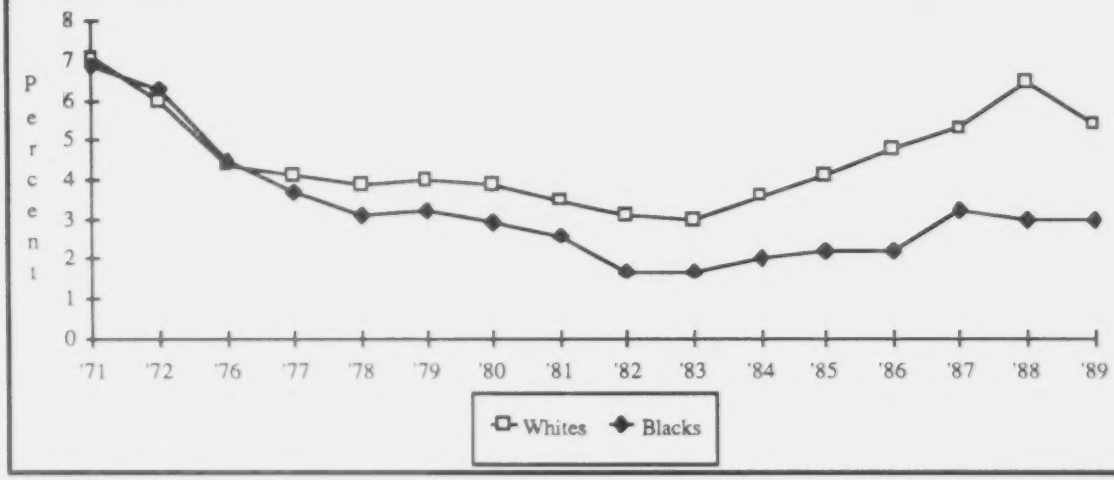
Probable Major	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
Business	29.8	23.8	+6.0
Nursing	5.4	2.4	+3.0
Computer Science	3.8	1.3	+2.5
Data Processing	2.5	.8	+1.7
Social Sciences	10.8	9.5	+1.3
Premedical, Predental, Preveterinary	3.7	2.7	+1.0
Communications	3.4	2.8	+ .6
Law Enforcement	2.0	1.5	+ .5
Biological Sciences	3.4	3.6	- .2
Physical Sciences	1.6	2.4	- .8
Engineering	8.8	10.0	-1.2
Arts and Humanities	9.1	6.1	-3.0
Education	6.6	9.6	-3.0
Undecided	3.8	7.3	-3.5

The relative lack of black students pursuing education careers is also a cause for concern. What do the twenty-year trends show us with respect to black students' aspirations for teaching careers? Figure 13 shows trends in the aspirations of black and white students for careers as elementary teachers. Both groups showed a sharply declining interest in such careers during the early part of the 1970s, but from the late 1970s forward the interest of black students declined more rapidly to the point where a significant gap between black and white students became evident.

There has been a slight recovery of interest in such careers during the late 1980s, but the black-white gap remains.

An almost identical pattern can be observed for careers in secondary education (Figure 14). Interest of both blacks and whites declined sharply during the early 1970s and continued through the early 1980s. There was a slight recovery of interest among white students during the latter part of the 1980s, but recovery of black students' interest was minimal. Thus, the black-white gap has widened considerably since the early 1970s.

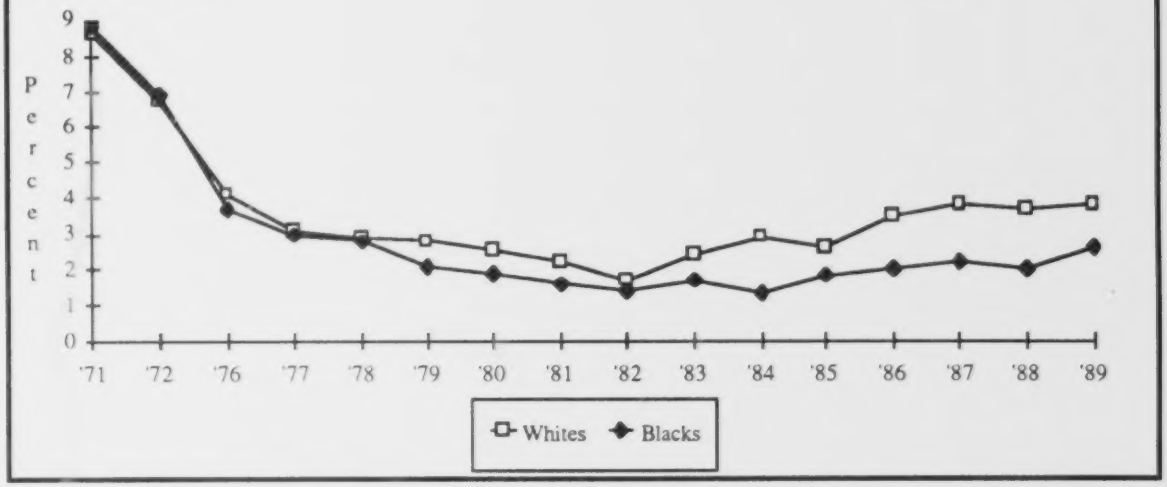
Figure 13.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen planning careers as elementary school teachers.



Beyond the black-white differences noted in Figures 13 and 14, it is important to realize that the *absolute* level of interest in teaching careers among black students remains substantially below any previous level and far below what it was in 1971. As a matter of fact, the decline of student interest in teaching careers actually began in the late 1960s, at a time when the interest of black students was actually *higher* than that of white students (see Astin, 1982, 1985).

When the relative lack of interest among black students in teaching careers is viewed in light of their rapidly declining interest in science, the future staffing prospects for our elementary and secondary schools appear to be bleak indeed. Unless major revisions in the recruitment and incentive systems for high school science teachers are introduced, the current shortage will continue to worsen, and the shortage will become especially severe among blacks.

Figure 14.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen planning careers as secondary school teachers.



Expectations for College

How do black students' expectations for their college experience compare with those of whites? The freshman questionnaire asks students to estimate their chances of participating in each of twenty-five activities along a four point scale: Very good chance, some chance, little chance, and no chance. If we look at the percentages who say that their chances of engaging in each activity are "very good," differences between black and white freshmen are relatively small. (The largest difference -- expectations to seek remedial help -- was reported earlier in Table 3.) Table 8 shows the ten other items producing the largest black-white differences. That blacks are more likely to expect to join a social fraternity or sorority or to be elected to a student office is consistent with their self-ratings (see below). That more blacks than whites expect to participate in varsity sports is, of course, to be expected, given the large numbers of blacks participating in sports such as football, basketball, and track. (However, the fact that blacks as a group devote less time to "exercise and sports" -- see Table 4 -- suggests that those blacks who are not members of college teams get much less exercise than their white counterparts do.) Black students' higher expectations for participating in student protests is consistent with their more frequent involvement in protests in high school (see Table 4).

Table 8
College Expectations of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

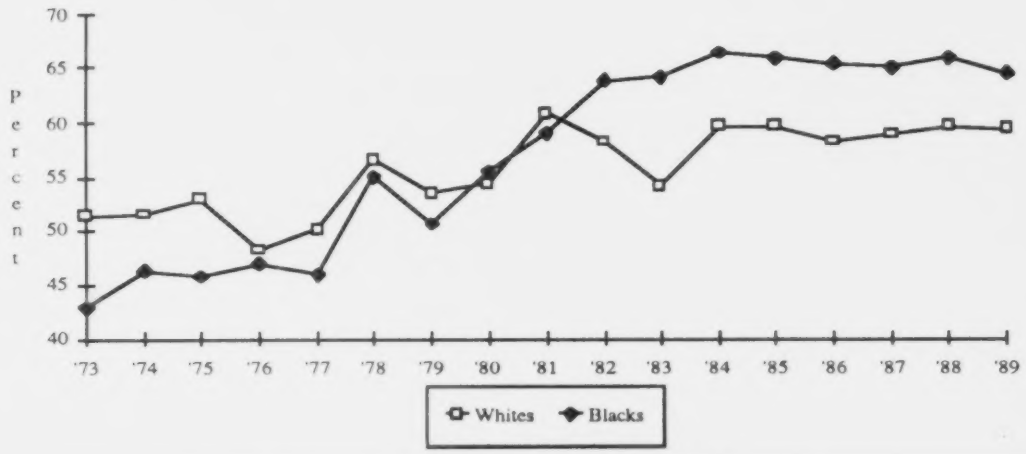
Expectation	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
"Very Good" Chance of			
Joining a social fraternity or sorority	23.7	17.6	+6.1
Being elected to a student office	8.0	2.9	+5.1
Playing varsity sports	19.3	14.4	+4.9
Participating in student protests	10.5	5.7	+4.8
Seeking individual counseling	7.6	2.8	+4.8
Seeking vocational counseling	6.8	4.0	+2.8
Changing major field	10.6	13.7	-3.1
Working at an outside job	16.6	20.6	-4.0
Getting a job to help pay college expenses	31.4	35.4	-4.0
Changing career choice	8.3	12.8	-4.5
Residence planned for freshman year:			
College dormitory	64.6	59.2	+5.4
With parents or other relatives	25.5	28.9	-3.4

The fact that whites are more likely to expect to get jobs to help pay for college expenses is consistent with the earlier finding concerning whites' greater reliance on savings and summer work (see Table 2). It is not entirely clear why blacks seem more inclined than whites to seek personal or vocational counseling, especially given that whites are more likely to be undecided about their careers and majors (Tables 6 and 7) and more likely to expect to change their careers and majors during college (Table 8). Perhaps their greater tendency toward depression (Table 4) explains part of this difference. Also, it may be that blacks are more apprehensive about the college experience in general, especially given that most of them will be attending institutions where they represent a relatively small minority. It should be emphasized, however, that the percentage responding "very good chance" to both counseling items are quite small (less than ten percent).

Table 8 also shows that proportionately more blacks than whites plan to live in college dormitories; more whites, on the other hand, plan to live with parents or other relatives. This pattern represents somewhat of a change from the residency pattern observed in the early 1970s. Figure 15 shows that proportionately more whites than blacks lived in college dormitories during

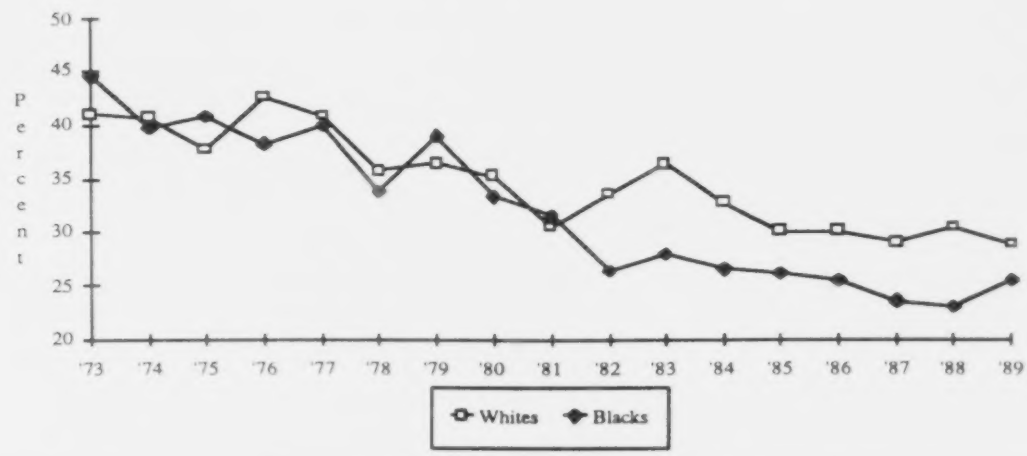
their freshman year in the early 1970s. While the proportion of *both* groups living in college residence halls has increased since that time, the rate of increase for blacks has been greater, so that they are now more likely than whites are to live in residence halls during their freshman year.

Figure 15.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen living in a college dormitory.



The opposite pattern is shown in Figure 16, which portrays trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen living with parents or relatives during the freshman year. The proportion

Figure 16.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen living with parents or relatives.



of both groups living with parents or relatives has declined since the early 1970s, but the decline has been faster among blacks, so that whites are now more likely to live with parents or relatives.

It is difficult to explain these differential trends in residency patterns. It may be that blacks are increasingly likely to enroll at colleges that have residential facilities or that require living on campus during the freshman year. Whatever the reason, these differential changes have important implications for black retention. Given that a variety of studies have shown that living in a residence hall during the freshman year is a positive factor in student retention (Astin, 1975, 1982; Chickering, 1974), these changes should ultimately produce increases in black retention during the undergraduate years.

Self-Concept

Table 9 compares the percentages of black and white freshmen who rate themselves either "above average" or in the "top ten percent" on each of nine traits. Consistent with their greater expectations to be elected to student office or to join social fraternities or sororities, blacks rate themselves higher than whites in social self-confidence, popularity, popularity with the opposite sex, and leadership ability. Whites, on the other hand, rate themselves higher on academically-oriented traits such as writing ability and mathematical ability. This finding is consistent with the much higher rating that whites give themselves on academic ability (see Table 3). Why white students rate themselves slightly higher on artistic ability is not clear. Blacks' higher rating on "drive to achieve", however, is consistent with their very high aspirations for advanced degrees (see Table 5).

Table 9
Self-Concept of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

Rates self "above-average" or in "top 10 percent" in	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
Social self-confidence	53.7	42.6	+11.1
Intellectual self-confidence	57.8	49.1	+8.7
Drive to achieve	69.6	63.6	+6.0
Popularity with the opposite sex	46.9	41.0	+5.9
Leadership ability	54.6	51.0	+3.6
Popularity	46.4	42.9	+3.5
Writing ability	36.9	40.6	-3.7
Artistic ability	19.6	24.5	-4.9
Mathematical ability	28.5	41.1	-12.6

In short, these results suggest a clear pattern of black-white differences in self-esteem: Blacks appear to have greater confidence in their social and interpersonal skills, while whites appear to have greater confidence in their cognitive and academic skills.

However, if we look at these differential patterns *within* the two racial groups, we find a greater imbalance among blacks between their interpersonal or social self-concept, on the one hand, and their academic self-concept on the other. Thus, if we separately average the percent who rate themselves above average on (a) the four social and interpersonal traits (social self-confidence, popularity, popularity with the opposite sex, and leadership ability) and on (b) the three academic traits (mathematical ability, writing ability, academic ability), the two averages among whites are almost identical: 45 percent for the social and interpersonal and 46 percent for the academic. Among blacks, however, we find a substantial discrepancy: 50 percent for the social or interpersonal and only 36 percent for the academic.

The one anomaly in Table 9 is the relatively high rating that blacks give themselves on "intellectual self-confidence." Why blacks should rate themselves higher than whites do on this trait while rating themselves substantially lower than whites do on academic ability, writing ability and mathematical ability is not clear. It may well be that the difference in wording accounts for the discrepancy: Blacks see themselves as having more "self-confidence" than "ability." In essence, the black students may be saying that "I'm confident that I'll make it with the academic ability that I have." Whatever the explanation, these results offer provocative possibilities for future research on black students' self-esteem. Except for the differential trends in academic ability discussed earlier (Figure 11), trends in self ratings during the past two decades have been similar for blacks and whites.

Values and Attitudes

How do black and white freshmen compare in their life goals, attitudes, values, and beliefs? Table 10 compares blacks and whites in terms of the percentage marking either "very important" or "essential" in response to each of eleven life goals. Blacks in general were more likely to endorse all of the eighteen life goals in the list; only the ten life goals producing the largest black-white differences are shown, together with the one life goal which was more frequently endorsed by whites. The first item in the table -- "promoting racial understanding" -- produced what is probably the largest black-white difference in the entire survey. While it is understandable that about three-fourths of the blacks would check this goal as either essential or very important, it is somewhat troubling that fewer than one-third of the whites (29.7%) believe that promoting racial understanding is essential or very important.

Table 10
Life Goals of Black and White Freshmen (Fall 1989)

"Very Important" or "Essential" to	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Difference
Promote racial understanding	74.2	29.7	+44.5
Participate in community action programs	40.3	20.9	+19.4
Be successful in my own business	61.1	42.5	+18.6
Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	55.0	38.7	+16.3
Help others in difficulty	72.8	57.6	+15.2
Influence social values	53.0	39.6	+13.4
Be very well off financially	87.2	74.0	+13.2
Have administrative responsibility for the work of others	54.4	42.2	+12.2
Influence political values	29.2	18.6	+10.6
Become involved in programs to help clean up the environment	32.4	25.0	+7.4
Raise a family	64.4	69.4	-5.0

Smaller but still substantial differences occur in the item, "participate in community action programs." Here we find about twice as many blacks as whites endorsing this as a very important or essential goal in life. The fact that blacks also rate "being successful in my own business" and "being very well off financially" as more important than whites do is consistent with blacks' strong preference for business majors and careers (Tables 6 and 7). Blacks are also more likely to endorse alturistic goals (helping others in difficulty) and activist goals (influencing social values and influencing the political structure). Again, these value differences are consistent with the blacks' greater involvement in student protests discussed earlier.

What are the educational implications of the substantial black-white differences in "promoting racial understanding"? Almost by definition, "racial understanding" must be a two-way street. Since they have grown up in a largely white society, blacks almost certainly have attained a greater "understanding" of white society than whites have gained of black society. Yet whites are substantially less inclined than blacks are to view "promoting racial understanding" as an important goal in life. Blacks, of course, may feel that they have a greater stake in promoting racial understanding, since "understanding" between groups probably has much more significance for those groups that have the least power.

While we might lament the fact that 70 percent of the white students are not committed to promoting racial understanding, we could also celebrate the fact that 30 percent of the white students see this as an "essential" or "very important" goal in life. Indeed, in terms of absolute numbers, *there are three times more white students than black students who are committed to promoting racial understanding*. Clearly, black college students have many potential white allies in their quest for greater understanding between the races.

Viewed from another perspective, the relatively low level of commitment to promoting racial understanding among white American college students poses a substantial educational challenge to college faculty and administrators. If we accept the argument that greater understanding between the races is a significant and important goal for American society, then it behooves all of us in academe to undertake a critical examination of our curricula, pedagogy, and student support services with this goal in mind.

Table 11 shows the response of blacks and whites to thirteen questions concerning social issues. The table shows the percentages who responded "agree strongly" or "agree somewhat." Not surprisingly, whites are more hawkish than blacks on issues of crime and punishment. Nearly twice as many blacks, for example, believe that the death penalty should be abolished, whereas more whites believe that "there is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals." Blacks are also more likely to endorse the traditionally liberal goals of a national health care plan, consumer protection, disarmament, and handgun control, whereas whites are more likely to endorse casual sex between consenting adults and less likely to say that the activities of married women should be confined to the home and family. In a certain sense these findings suggest an interesting paradox: Whereas blacks endorse traditionally liberal positions on a number of social issues, especially crime and welfare, they are more apt than whites to endorse conventional roles for women and to abstain from alcohol and tobacco.

Although both blacks and whites tend to reject the idea of raising taxes to reduce the federal budget deficit, whites are somewhat more likely than blacks to support this idea. This finding may reflect blacks' slightly greater propensity to see the benefits of a college education in monetary terms or to give greater priority to "being very well off financially" (Table 10).

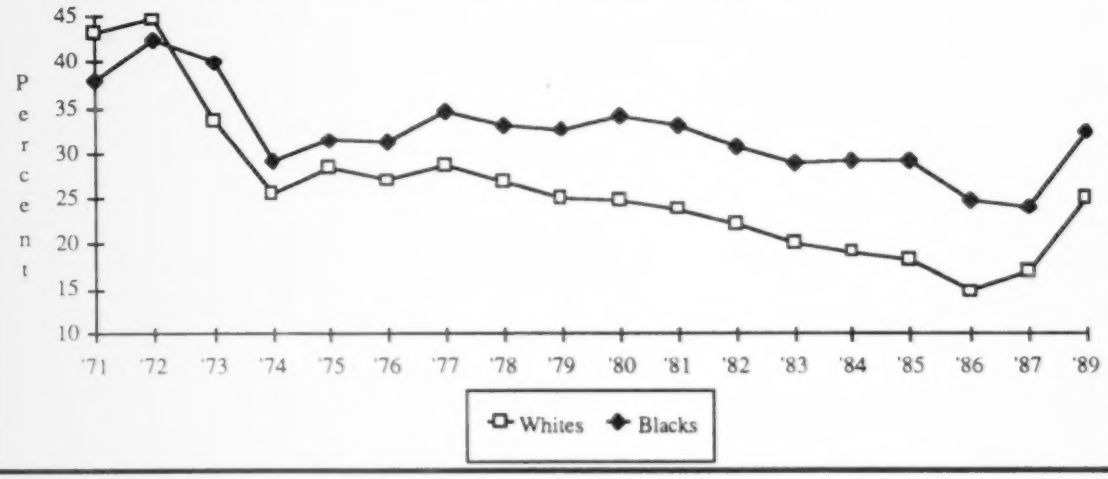
In most cases, the changing attitudes and values of black freshmen mirrored those of whites. There were, however, four attitude and value items upon which the trends for black and white college freshmen showed interesting differences.

Table 11
Attitudes of Black and White Freshmen on Various Social Issues (Fall 1989)

Agree "strongly" or "somewhat" that	Percent Among Blacks	Percent Among Whites	Black-White Differences
The death penalty should be abolished	35.4	19.3	+16.1
Busing is O.K. if it helps to achieve racial balance in the schools	67.6	54.7	+12.9
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns	86.9	76.7	+10.2
A national health care plan is needed to cover everybody's health costs	84.6	74.4	+10.2
The federal government is not doing enough to promote disarmament	76.2	67.1	+9.1
The federal government is not doing enough to protect consumers	74.7	67.6	+7.1
The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family	31.4	24.9	+6.5
The chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one's earning power	76.7	70.5	+6.2
The federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution	81.9	86.9	-5.0
The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit	23.3	29.2	-5.9
If two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex	43.5	50.6	-7.1
There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals	57.7	69.7	-12.0

Figure 17 shows the percent of black and white freshmen who rated "being involved in programs to clean up the environment" as an important life goal. Although in the early 1970s blacks were slightly less likely than whites to embrace this goal, blacks became increasingly more interested in helping to clean up the environment than did whites. Although the gap between blacks and whites decreased somewhat in the late 1980s, blacks are still more likely to value this goal. In light of the fact that whites are likely to believe the federal government isn't doing enough to control environmental pollution (Table 11), this finding supports the idea that -- ideology notwithstanding -- black freshmen are more likely to be social activists than white freshmen.

Figure 17.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen rating "becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment" as a very important goal in life.



Contrasting changes between black and white freshmen can be seen in terms how important they believe "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" to be. Figure 18 shows that although blacks and whites have shown a declining interest in this goal since the mid-1970s, the decline among white college freshmen has been much steeper than the decline among blacks. Among all college freshmen, the declining interest in developing a meaningful philosophy of life has been accompanied by an increase in interest to be "very well off financially" (see Astin, Green, Korn, & Berz, 1990). Although black freshmen are very interested in financial security (Table 10) and careers in business (Table 6), these interests do not seem to have come at the expense of wanting to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.

Turning to student attitudes, we see in Figure 19 that there has been a general decrease in support for the abolition of capital punishment. Although the gap between blacks and whites grew dramatically between 1971 and 1978, the gap between blacks and whites has been narrowing since then. Although black freshmen are still more likely to support the death penalty's abolition, support for this traditionally liberal view is declining among blacks at a rate similar to that found among whites.

Figure 18.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen rating "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" as a very important goal in life.

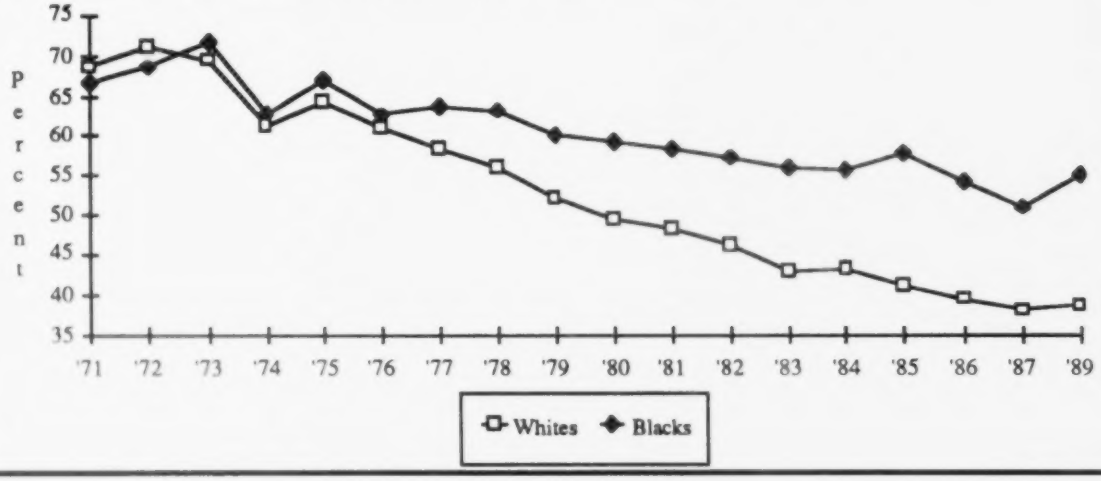
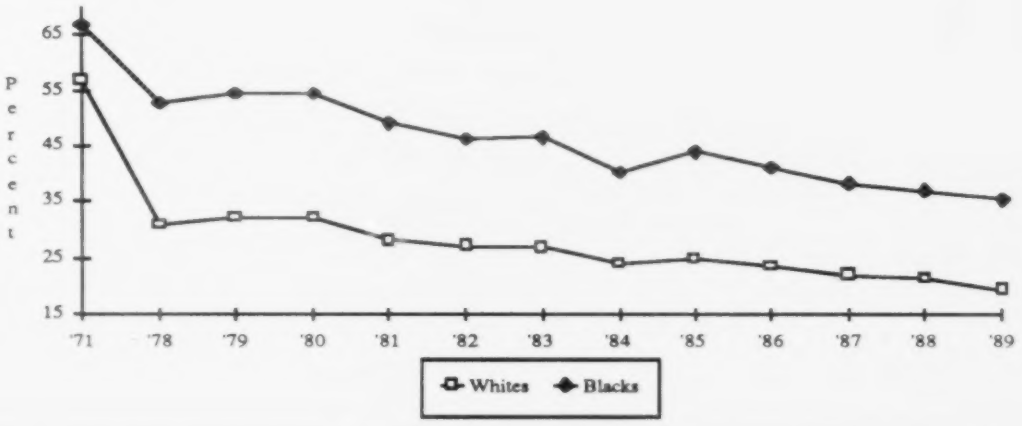


Figure 19.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen who support the abolition of capital punishment.

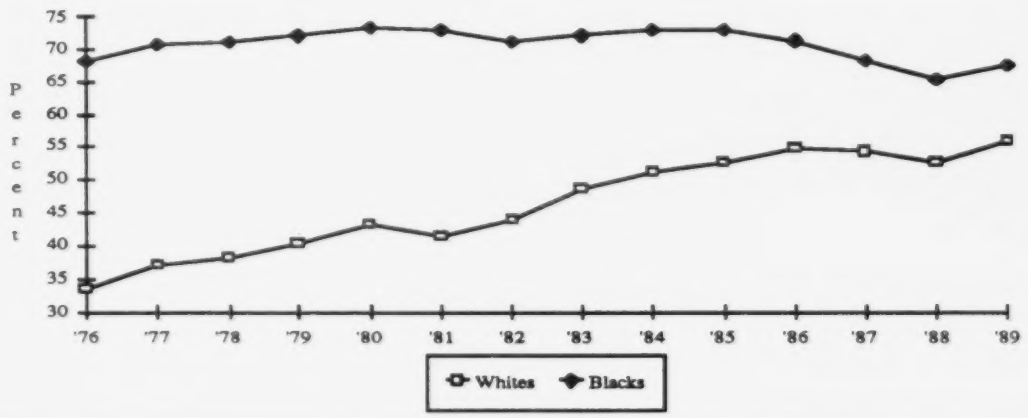


Finally, Figure 20 shows dramatic differences in the trends among blacks and whites in terms of their support for busing as a means of achieving racial balance in the schools. For example, in 1976 only about half as many whites as blacks supported busing while in 1989 the gap had dropped to around 10% (67% of blacks supported busing versus 57% of whites). Although black support for busing has remained relatively stable, the increase of white support for busing

has been dramatic. Whether the increase of support among whites is related to the decreasing emotionality of the issue or through students' positive experiences with busing might be an interesting topic for further research.

In sum, although black and white students share a great many attitudes and values, important distinctions exist. These distinctions most clearly reflect social and economic inequities that exist in American society. Black freshman are more likely to value the promotion of racial understanding as a goal, to be personally engaged in social activism, and to hold more liberal viewpoints. Although whites have become more supportive of some activities designed to ameliorate racial inequalities (i.e., busing), this trend is not universal. Specifically, whites are less supportive of the abolition of the death penalty even though this policy disproportionately affects blacks and other minority groups.

Figure 20.
Trends in the percentages of black and white freshmen who support busing as a method of achieving racial balance in the schools.



Summary

The major findings of this national study of current black college freshmen and of trends over the past two decades can be summarized as follows:

- Socioeconomic differences between black and white college freshmen reflect those found in society at large. That is, the families of black college students have markedly lower incomes and education than do their white counterparts, and blacks are also much less likely to have both parents alive and living together. Furthermore, while the gap in parental education has narrowed somewhat, the gap in economic advantage between blacks and whites has not changed substantially during the past two decades.

- Despite greater economic disadvantage, black college freshmen over the past two decades have experienced declining access to financial aid in the form of federal grants. Instead, they have been forced to rely more on student loans. This shift from grants to greater dependence on loans has occurred among both blacks and whites, but the shift has been more pronounced among blacks.

- This lack of availability of financial assistance appears to be an increasingly important determinant of black students' college choice patterns. There has been a growing trend over the past decade for black students, relative to whites, to report that low tuition was a major factor in their decision about which college to attend, and that they are not attending their first-choice college.

- As measured by their high school grades and expressed need for remediation, entering black freshmen continue to be less well-prepared for college than are their white counterparts. However, black -white differences in self-perceptions of "academic ability" have been narrowing over time, possibly because of the recent gains among blacks in performance on standardized college admissions tests.

- Despite their poorer high school grades and greater need for remediation, black freshmen report that they expect to do just as well, if not better, in college than their white counterparts. Clearly, additional follow up research is needed to determine the significance of the black freshman student's high aspiration levels for future success.

- Recent trends suggest that the current shortages of blacks in the fields of science and academia will become even more severe in the future. Although black students continue to report high career aspirations (e.g., they are consistently more likely than whites to aspire for advanced professional and academic degrees), their choices do not reflect preference for careers in the sciences or college teaching. This pattern is both perplexing and disturbing, inasmuch as these are professional domains where blacks continue to be most underrepresented.

- The life goals, values, and political attitudes that black college freshmen endorse continue to reflect a clear recognition of social and economic inequities between the races in this society. Relative to their white counterparts, black freshmen are more likely to report "promoting racial understanding" as a major life goal; they are more likely to be social activists; and they have more liberal political beliefs (i.e., less "victim blame" ideologies) about such issues as crime, capital punishment, and health care.

- Black students show an interesting mixture of strong support for liberal social policies coupled with a conservative lifestyle and orientation toward work. Thus, compared to white students, blacks are more strongly oriented toward "being successful in my own business" and being "very well off financially," are much more likely to abstain from tobacco and alcohol, and are more likely to advocate a traditional homemaker role for women and to oppose tax increases to reduce the federal deficit. At the same time, black students are much more likely than white students to support handgun control, a national health care plan, consumer protection, school busing, and abolition of the death penalty.

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